

# Flavian epic and Trajanic historiography: speaking into the silence

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# Speaking into the Silence: Interactions between Flavian Epic and Trajanic

## Historiography

### Introduction

This volume celebrates the bustling connectedness of the Nervan-Trajanic-Hadrianic period, an ostentatiously new cultural milieu celebrating the freedom to interact. Its authors grasp this opportunity not only by constructing intimate reciprocal literary relationships and wide-sweeping socio-literary networks, but also by generating meaning through conspicuously *absent* forms of literary engagement which operate beyond conventional horizons of critical expectation, via ‘silenced’ intertexts, postures of cultural isolation, and paraded alienation.<sup>1</sup> The intense noise of this age, together with its attraction to oblivion, is at least partly a reaction to the voice-stopping *servitus* of Domitianic Rome, or so Tacitus famously claims in the preface to *Agricola*: the Flavian past there is not just a literary ‘Dark Age’ but also an era to be acknowledged only with discomfort by those surviving into the Nervan-Trajanic present. Yet while critics have begun to turn their gaze upon continuities between Flavian past and post-Flavian present, above all in the epoch-spanning careers of Juvenal, Tacitus, Pliny, Frontinus and Martial, the notion that Flavian epic might cast its shadow on the Nervan-Trajanic period has received less attention.

This is hardly surprising. Aided by the malicious critique of Juvenal’s first satire, Flavian epic has long been regarded as a retreat into the hackneyed world of myth, actively in flight from the dangerous category of ‘relevance’.<sup>2</sup> Critics have always been interested in the recovery of allusions to specific historical events in individual epics, and modern readers have been alert to the ‘politics’ of Flavian epic poetics, uncovering contemporary political

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<sup>1</sup> On ‘silenced intertexts’ see Marchiesi 2013; for alienation and cultural isolation see Geue and Uden in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> *Sat.* 1.1-11. On Juvenal’s possible sideswipe at Valerius Flaccus in particular (*Sat.* 1.6-11), see Henderson 1995: 108-11 and Geue in this volume.

and social nuance in Flavian epic. But Donald T. McGuire's 1997 monograph on the themes of suicide, tyranny and civil war in Flavian epic – a set of texts, which, McGuire argues, investigates modes of political behaviour, the workings of monarchy and authorial voice under authoritarian rule in ways which refract contemporary Rome – is still the only general treatment of the politics and poetics of Flavian epic. And his discussion of these texts, conditioned by the hostile periodisation of Pliny and Tacitus, and modelled after Soviet writing-strategies of the 1930s, makes 'dissidence', 'subversion' and 'resistance' central to his reading of Flavian epic (as much other work on the politics of Flavian (and Neronian) literature, still tends to do).<sup>3</sup>

Both in literary-critical value judgement and in the political framing of the poems, then, modern critics have read Flavian epic with the grain of Nerva-Trajanic judgment, for the most part treating this poetry as a distinctly self-contained entity. Intertextual analysis and citation studies have done something to break down such divisions, 'proving', for example, that Tacitus has read Valerius, Statius and Silius.<sup>4</sup> But potentially more fruitful are the insights of recent work on epic and historiography more generally: in parallel readings of individual psychology and group behaviour, investigations of the shared intellectual backgrounds of history and epic, and analysis of similar approaches to causation and

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter, while attempting to escape such 'totalitarian' framing, acknowledges the importance of and works closely with McGuire 1997. Other important political readings are (for Statius) Dominik 1994, Braund 2006, McNelis 2007; (for Silius) Liebeschuetz 1979: 167-80, Ripoll 1998, Marks 2005; (for Valerius Flaccus) Burck 1971, 1981, Hershkowitz 1998, Zissos 2009, Bernstein 2013: the classic discussion of the politics of Flavian literature is Ahl 1986; cf. Bartsch 1994, Rudich 1997 on Neronian 'dissidence' and 'doublespeak'.

<sup>4</sup> See esp. Woodman 2009: 36-7. On Tacitus/Silius, Jacobs 2010, Manolaraki & Augoustakis 2010: on Tacitus/Valerius Flaccus, Syme 1929; Stover (forthcoming) 2017. Significant intertextual studies of earlier epic include (on Virgil and Sallust) Ash 2002: 257-266; (on Virgil and Livy) Rossi 2004; (on Lucan and Livy) Radicke 2004; (on Tacitus and Virgil/Lucan) Joseph 2010, 2012.

motivation, approaches to the literary interaction of historiography and epic have expanded beyond allusive influence.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter will stretch such interactivity further, aiming to look again at periodisation and literary interactivity between two particular authors, Valerius Flaccus and Tacitus, through the prism of a reader-response ‘reverse reception’. Focussing first on the *Argonautica* and a Tacitean text that has not been read in close contact with Flavian epic, the *Agricola*, I will argue that a reading of Valerius’ text through Tacitus’ biography – a biography that places an individual hero within a corrupt, tyrannical system, within a frame juxtaposing a new imperial ‘golden age’ with the tyranny of Domitian – will help readers to negotiate the problematic periodisation of the Flavian epic, often seen as *either* an ‘optimistic’ Vespasianic poem of the 70s *or* a ‘pessimistic’ Domitianic work of the 80s and early 90s. Such reverse-reception is of course the result of circular reading – Valerius ‘feels’ Tacitean because we have read the *Argonautica* through Tacitus.<sup>6</sup> But a more nuanced awareness of the ‘impossible’ affinities between Tacitus and Valerius in this reverse reception should prompt new reflections on Tacitus’ own problematic separation of past and present and the support readings that perceive an ideological instability in *Agricola*. Moving from the individual in history to broader notions of Roman identity, I will then attempt to reverse the trend, showing how Valerius’ panoramic view of warfare at Colchis can in turn open up new insights into the imperialism of Tacitus’ *Agricola* and beyond. Though I will not claim that Tacitus has been directly ‘influenced’ by Valerius, I will conclude that a reader-response oriented reading of the Flavian epic alongside Tacitus is evidence of a much broader, distinctly post Julio-Claudian and obviously shared cultural discourse in these texts,

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Leigh 2007: the edited collections of Kraus 2010, and Miller and Woodman 2010, offer contributions reaching beyond intertextuality in Hardie 2010, Gibson 2010, Jacobs 2010.

<sup>6</sup> McGuire 1997, esp. 147-54 does not argue for explicit intertextual ‘interactivity’ with Tacitus, instead reading the epics ‘in conjunction’ with posthumous descriptions of Domitianic tyranny. McGuire suggests that Flavian epic offers ‘indirect commentary’ on what is nevertheless a distinctive new characterization of tyranny.

one seeking to examine anew the nature of elite Roman identity through war after civil discord.<sup>7</sup>

### 1. Reversing reception: a Tacitean *Argonautica*?

et sicut uetus aetas uidit quid ultimum in libertate esset, ita nos quid in seruitute, adempto per inquisitiones etiam loquendi audiendique commercio. memoriam quoque ipsam cum uoce perdissemus, si tam in nostra potestate esset obliuisci quam tacere. *Agr.*2.3

‘And just as a previous age saw liberty at its most extreme, so we saw an extreme of slavery, with informers taking from us even the interaction of conversation. We would have lost memory itself along with our power of speech, if it had been equally in our power to forget as to be silent.’

At first glance Tacitus’ *Agricola*, with its stark picture of late Flavian Rome as a ‘silenced generation’, inhabits a very different world from Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica*, the first Flavian epic, and one which promises from the start the bold primacy of the voyage, the heroic status of its participants, and a newly assertive, uncomplicated authorial voice.<sup>8</sup>

Valerius’ proem fuses the recuperation of a traditional epic form with the fortunes of the new ruling dynasty: catasterism of Argo is the ultimate *telos* of the poem and the poet predicts that Vespasian himself, an emperor famed for his own great nautical exploits, will eventually take his place in the sky too (*Arg.*1.1-21). And when Valerius’ Jupiter promises – in a prophecy that previews the course of history – his sons the chance of apotheosis through epic endeavour (*labor*), the epicist frames the journey as origin not only for individual heroes, but

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Rimell in this volume, which reads Martial and *Agricola* in synchronic dialogue.

<sup>8</sup> As Conte 1994: 489-90 summarises, ‘Valerius [sc. exhibits] ... a reactionary poetics. The subject is mythological, the divine apparatus omnipresent, the moral approach unquestionably edifying.’ Important readings of the ‘rehabilitated’ epic voice of *Argonautica* are Feeney 1991: 316-34; Hershkowitz 1998: the strongest and most recent ‘optimistic’ reading of a ‘Vespasianic’ *Argonautica* is Stover 2012, who at 7-26 argues for a completion date not long after AD 79. Cf. Ehlers 1980, who argues that the epic was mostly finished by AD 80, with ‘allusions’ to later contemporary events being emendations of a second published edition.

also for the progress of the universe itself.<sup>9</sup> No wonder, then, that critics have interpreted the *Argonautica* as, in essence, an *Aeneid* for Vespasian, Argo's civilising journey as a truly suggestive model for the exploration-conquest and peace-bringing exploits of the new Flavian regime.<sup>10</sup>

A very different strand of critical interpretation, concentrating instead on the evocation of a contemporary social climate, has argued that Valerius' *Argonautica* is a poem of the 80s and early 90s, engaged in pessimistic analysis of contemporary Rome, even if written through the Greek mythological lens.<sup>11</sup> In addition to potential allusions to historical events after 79, McGuire stresses Valerius' constant evocation of the oppressive tyrannical milieu of Tacitus' imperial Rome, featuring in Pelias and Aeetes (kings of Thessaly and Colchis) brooding, deceptive and wrathful rulers who prefigure Tacitus' Tiberius and Domitian.<sup>12</sup> Andrew Zissos' contribution to the 'politics' of *Argonautica* provides a more cautious and nuanced approach to the same question, pointing to the epic's interest in interrogating 'socio-cultural and political givens' and arguing that in addition to the contemporising themes of civil war, tyranny and suicide, the *Argonautica* betrays a more

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<sup>9</sup> Jupiter will go on specifically to connect Argo's journey and this *labor* to a series of shifts in empires, which will, he strongly hints, will culminate with the eventual domination of Rome (*Arg.*1.558-60): this opening, together with the poem's depiction of the rape of Medea in Herodotean terms in book 8 (*Arg.*8.395-6; cf. *Hist.* 1.1-2) frames the poem as between myth and history after the Virgilian model: see Hershkowitz 1998: 236; Zissos 2008: xli; Gibson 2010: 31 for more on the Herodotean framing.

<sup>10</sup> On the important self-presentation of the Flavians as conquerors, restorers of the state, 'bringers of peace', and figures for continuity in the aftermath of the civil wars of AD 69 (also markedly inspired by Augustan models) see for coinage e.g. Rosso 2009; Hurlet 2015: in statuary and portraiture, e.g. Hannestad 1986: 117-21; Kleiner 1992: 173-189; on the Temple of Peace, begun in AD 71, Darwall-Smith 1996: 55-68.

<sup>11</sup> Syme 1929; Preiswerk 1934; Liberman 1997; Kleywegt 2005; Zissos 2008 see allusions to events of the early 90s. While the proem praises a living Vespasian, the only secure 'datable' moment in the poem is a reference to the eruption of Vesuvius (*Arg.*4.507-11). On the problems of dating the work through its proem see Syme 1929; Lefèvre 1971; Otte 1992: 1-9.

<sup>12</sup> McGuire 1997: 185-97. See also Preiswerk 1934: 439-40; Burck 1971: 29, 48; Hershkowitz 1998: 246.

specific interest in the role of heroic aristocracy, together with a distinct nostalgia for the republican past, which amounts to the inclusion of a subtle ‘oppositional perspective’.<sup>13</sup>

The problem, then, for readers of Valerius, is that we have two seemingly incompatible *Argonauticas*. The optimistic, forward-looking epic of the 70s, written through close contact with Virgil, celebrates the new regime in uncomplicated, confident voice: but this voice is in hostile competition with the brooding, ‘oppositional’ and more nebulously Tacitean study of the 80s and early 90s. Such readings have resulted in critical *impasse*: Zissos has concluded that the *Argonautica* is a fundamentally fractured epic capable of only the most aporetic ideological perspective.<sup>14</sup> But readers of Tacitus’ *Agricola* will already be familiar with the challenges of heroism (and of writing about heroism) in an age hostile to virtue, of writing quest and conquest against a backdrop of tyranny, and of framing ‘dark’ tyranny against the dawn of a new golden age.<sup>15</sup> And while Tacitus pits glorious foreign conquest against servitude at Rome, and champions Agricola’s exemplary heroism, he also provides a powerful internal critique of such conquest, implicating both Romans and barbarian-Britons in a mutually debilitating enslavement, acknowledging the complexities and perhaps compromises of Agricola’s behaviour, and potentially even obscuring the line between Flavian past and Nervan present.

To my knowledge, *Agricola* and *Argonautica* have not been read together before.<sup>16</sup> But in their framing they are strikingly similar. *Agricola*’s main theme is, of course, ‘how a man can become great even under a bad emperor’ (*Agr.*42.4), and Jason’s mission too is one

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<sup>13</sup> Zissos 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Zissos 2006; Zissos 2009. Cf. Blum 2015, who sees a pervading moral *aporia* in the *Argonautica*, structured through the struggle characters have with their ‘exemplary’ metapoetic and mythological histories.

<sup>15</sup> On the complex characterisation, imperialism and periodisation of *Agricola* see e.g. Bastomsky 1985; James 2000; Clarke 2001; Evans 2003; Whitmarsh 2006; Sailor 2008; Lavan 2011, 2013: 127-42.

<sup>16</sup> Though McGuire 1997: 147-8 compares the situations of Agricola and Jason as part of larger reflections on the Domitianic character of Valerian tyranny: see below.

undertaken in the shadow of oppressive tyranny. Jason finds himself trapped by a hopeless political situation at home, in a socio-cultural constellation that anticipates the kind of bind which Tacitus visualizes for Agricola under Domitian:<sup>17</sup>

Mox taciti patuere doli nec vellera curae  
esse viro, sed sese odiis immania cogi  
in freta. ...  
heu quid agat? **populumne** levem veterique **tyranno**  
infensum atque olim miserantes Aesona **patres**  
advocet an socia Iunone et Pallade fretus  
armisona sperat magis et freta iussa capessat,  
siqua operis tanti domito consurgere ponto  
fama queat? tu sola animos mentemque peruris,  
Gloria: te viridem videt immunemque senectae  
Phasidis in ripa stantem iuvenesque vocantem.

Arg.1.64-6, 71-8

Soon Pelias' silent trap lay open: the Fleece was not really the hero's task, but he was being forced onto the vast seas through his uncle's hatred. [...] But what could he do? Call upon a fickle *populus*, hostile to the old tyrant? *Patres*, who had long pitied Aeson? Or, putting his faith in comrade Juno and Pallas of the clashing armour, should he hope for more and take to the sea as ordered, and see if any fame could arise from the taming of the ocean, such a great undertaking? You alone inflame hearts and minds, Glory: Jason sees you, youthful and untouched by old age, standing on the bank of Phasis, calling young men.

Nor does Valerius' Jason simply contemplate rebellion in terms which look both Roman and proto-Tacitean. He also sets the individual hero's quest for glory (cf. Arg.1.77) against an overarching frame of tyrannical oppression, precisely the conditions Tacitus will figure for Agricola, also the possessor of an ardent nature (*incensum ac flagrantem animum*, Agr.4.3) who must balance his strong instinct to gain glory with a wise moderation. Indeed, when Pelias sends Jason on his way 'gazing on him calmly, with an unthreatening expression' (*tranquilla tuens nec fronte timendus*, Arg.1.38) he closely anticipates the Domitian of *Agricola*, who receives news of Agricola's deeds *fronte laetus, pectore anxius* (with a happy expression and uneasy heart, Agr.22.4).<sup>18</sup> Read in interaction with Tacitus' *Agricola*, Jason is

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<sup>17</sup> McGuire 1997: 169 and Zissos 2006: 671-2; 2009: 354-9 note the Romanizing language here, with its division between the 'people' (*populus*), elders/senators (*patres*), and tyrant (*tyrannus*).

<sup>18</sup> McGuire 1997: 147-8. Agr. 41 once again returns to Domitian's hostility to Agricola, sparked by the man's glory (*Causa periculi (...) infensus virtutibus princeps et gloria viri (...) Sic Agricola simul suis virtutibus, simul*



Roman not just in his predicament but also in his decision to seek success and fulfilment in the attainment of glory abroad, though robbed of the same opportunities at home.

Tacitus' encomiastic account of Agricola is, however, notoriously not without ambiguity. In an age whose hostility to merit made even Agricola's desire for a soldier's renown (*militaris gloriae cupido*, *Agr.*5) a perilous thing, Tacitus creates a 'quietest' hero who rejects the futile glory of suicidal resistance in favour of a policy of 'heroic moderation'. But Tacitus allows Agricola's moderation to come uncomfortably close to complicity with the subjugation he is both enforcing on the Britons and apparently escaping at Rome.<sup>19</sup> At first sight we might think that the position of Valerius' Jason's situation is far less ambiguous: he has the opportunity for 'epic' glory guaranteed not only by the protection of Juno and Pallas but also, apparently, by an explicit vision of *Gloria*.<sup>20</sup> Yet it is important to point out that Valerius offers a similarly complex mix of motivations here. Indeed, it could be argued that Jason is self-consciously refusing to confront reality by *deciding* to interpret his mission as route to glory. He certainly does not trust his fellow sailors with the truth, encouraging his fellow Argonauts to embark with him by framing the voyage as divinely-ordained epic rather than tyrannical trap:

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*vitiis aliorum in ipsa gloria praeceps agebatur.* ('Agricola's peril came from a *princeps* hostile to virtue and his own glory... Thus in the midst of his very glory he was being hurled headlong, both by his own virtues and by others' vices', *Agr.*41) On the special role of *gloria* in Valerius' *Argonautica*, see Ripoll 1998: 196-213; Stover 2012: 58, 300; Blum 2015: 70-3 provides further discussion of the generic and ethical context of this passage.

<sup>19</sup> See esp. *Agr.*5.3 and 39.2 on Agricola and martial glory. While Sailor 2008: 72-118 argues that Britain offers opportunities for engagement with *labor et periculum* (*Agr.*18.5) not possible at Rome (cf. esp. p.80, 'Tacitus' marking off Britain... lets Tacitus show a system of glory operating with full freedom from the distorting pull of Rome's center of gravity'), he is not able to fully escape servitude at Rome: Lavan 2013: 139-41 rightly points to the uncomfortable way in which Agricola's heroic *obsequium* and *modestia* at Rome echoes the language of senatorial enslavement elsewhere in *Agricola*. Cf. Whitmarsh 2006: 305-7.

<sup>20</sup> Zissos 2008 ad loc. rightly notes Valerius' return here to a distinctly Homeric *kleos*-code. Blum 2015: 72-3, noting the similarity of the description of *Gloria* to Homer's Sirens, reads Jason as potentially 'seduced' by glory here.

'superum quando consulta videtis,  
 o socii, quantisque datur spes maxima coeptis,  
 vos quoque nunc vires animosque adfert paternos.  
 non mihi Thessalici pietas culpanda tyranni  
 suspecte doli: deus haec, deus omine dextro  
 imperat; **ipse suo voluit commercia mundo**  
**Iuppiter** et tantos hominum miscere labores.  
 ite, viri, mecum dubiisque evincite rebus  
 quae meminisse iuvet nostrisque nepotibus instent.'

Arg.1.244-9

'Since you see heaven's decision, comrades, and the great hope granted to so great an enterprise, summon now your strength and ancestral courage. I will not blame the criminal piety of the Thessalian tyrant, or suspect a plot: it is god – *god* – who orders this voyage with propitious omen. Jupiter himself has willed interaction for his world, and has wanted to stir up such great human labours.<sup>21</sup> Go, men, and with me win in adversity that which will be a pleasure to remember, things that will spur on our descendants.'

From this point of view, Jason's own vision of glory is less divine epiphany than acute understanding of human nature, offering the right kind of motivation for his young crew. His speech to his fellow Argonauts certainly advocates a rhetoric of heroic optimism that at the same time points up its own deceptiveness, in the same kind of self-critiquing approach to heroism with which Tacitus' *Agricola* will later struggle. Jason's appeal to historicising exemplarity taps into the very tradition of heroic memory *Agricola* will later be designed to perpetuate. And Jason's confidence in the divine backing of his mission is 'guaranteed' by his casting as the new Aeneas, his speech peppered with obvious borrowings from Aeneas' famously exhortatory speech after shipwreck in Libya (*Aen.*1.198-3).<sup>22</sup> Yet we know that Jason is in fact lying to his men at this point when he makes Jupiter, not Pelias, responsible for the mission: while his *representation* of the voyage is 'epic', the reality is that it has been instigated by the jealousy of a monarch.<sup>23</sup> While *Agricola* and Jason inhabit different generic worlds, their motivation to fashion a new kind of heroism, to say nothing of the

<sup>21</sup> Kleywegt 2005: 150 notes the zeugma (cf. TLL.8.1058.33) produced when both *labores* and *commercias* are dependent on *miscere* (with *commercias* = 'exchange' (OLD 10), 'stir up' (OLD 13); with *labores* = 'combine efforts', OLD 9).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Zissos 2008 ad loc.

<sup>23</sup> Note that Jason's self-serving appeal to heroic exemplarity echoes Pelias (*Arg.*1.1.40-57), who in addition to family duty appeals to Jason's 'manly spirit' and dares him to deem himself worthy of danger.

uncomfortable fit that representation of heroism may have with ‘reality’, shares significant similarities.

Indeed Valerius compounds the pressure to read this way when he has his hero declare that *commercia mundo* is the purpose of Argo’s voyage. *commercium* is famously rejected in the *Aeneid*: the single instance occurs when the enraged Aeneas refuses to engage in what he disparagingly terms ‘trading in war’ (*Aen.*10.532). Instead, Jason’s words appeal to a different conceptual world: he evokes not merely ‘human interchange’ but more specifically the business of imperialism, evoking, for example, the elder Pliny’s stress on the interdependent role of Roman empire and commerce: *quis enim non communicato orbe terrarum maiestate Romani imperii profecisse vitam putet commercio rerum ac societate festae pacis...*? (Who would not admit that intercommunication has been established throughout the world through the majesty of the Roman Empire, life has advanced through the interchange of commodities and the partnership of joyful peace...? Pliny, *NH.*14.1).<sup>24</sup> Again, this may frame Jason as new ‘Flavian’ Aeneas, on a mission of exploration, conquest and civilisation, mouthpiece and symbol for an up-to-date positivist narrative of foreign imperialist expansion. Yet there is a sting in the tail to Pliny’s vision of the benefits of expansive Roman *imperium*, for he goes on to argue that such expansion has corrupted later generations;<sup>25</sup> and such negative imperial expansion is hinted at in Jason’s own words, which allusively echo Seneca’s worries about *commercium* and empire in the *Natural Questions*:

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<sup>24</sup> All translations of Pliny are Rackham, sometimes adapted. *Natural History* was published in AD 77: on its composition dates see Baldwin 1995. In historiography, natural history and natural philosophy, the language of *commercium* in the sense of ‘human exchange’ (of conversation, business, relationships) is common, but (with the important exception of Lucan, who is also interested in the relationship between Rome’s expansion and war – see below) the term *commercium* is very rare in epic pre-Valerius. On *commercium* and civilisation cf. e.g. Woolf 1998: 67; on *commercia* in Valerius see Zissos 2008: 204; Stover 2012: 54-5, 81 (a more positive reading of the passage).

<sup>25</sup> *posteris laxitas mundi et rerum amplitudo damno fuit. [...] pessum iere vitae pretia omnesque a maximo bono liberales dictae artes in contrarium cecidere ac servitute sola profici coeptum.* ‘The expansion of the world and our wealth of resources was detrimental to later generations. [...] The true prizes of life have gone

Quid quod omnibus inter se populis **commercium** dedit et gentes dissipatas locis **miscuit**? Ingens naturae beneficium, si illud in iniuriam suam non uertat hominum furor! [...] Non in hoc prouidentia ac dispositor ille mundi deus aera uentis exercendum dedit et illos ab omni parte ne quid esset situ squalidum effudit, ut nos classes partem freti occupaturas compleremus milite armato et hostem in mari aut post mare quaereremus. Quae nos dementia exagitat et in mutuum componit exitium? (*NQ*.5.18.4-6.1)

Just think how wind has given all nations communications with each other and brought together peoples separated by geography! An enormous kindness of nature's, if the folly of humans did not pervert it to their own harm! [...] It was not for this that providence and the god who manages the world gave the winds the task of keeping the air moving and poured out winds from all directions to prevent anything becoming desolate through neglect – it was not so we could cram armed soldiers into fleets that would take control of a large part of the sea, nor so that we could search for the enemy on the sea or beyond the sea. What madness drives us on and sets us against each other to our mutual destruction?<sup>26</sup>

Valerius' interdiscursive appeal to more pessimistic assessments of the cost of progress from historiography and natural philosophy – set within a context that self-consciously destabilizes the heroic nature of Jason's epic endeavour – anticipates the ambivalence of the broader imperialist vision of *Agricola*, in which the heroism of *Agricola* is challenged and undermined by the broader unease about the direction and effects of empire.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious interaction between *Agricola* and *Argonautica* occurs in the aftermath of Argo's embarkation. Here, the important distinction Tacitus makes between the *gloria* achieved by *Agricola* and the fundamentally useless *gloria* attained by the Stoic martyrs at the cost of their lives but with no benefit to Rome (*Agr*.42.5) finds anticipatory

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to ruin, and all the arts called 'liberal' from liberty, the supreme good, have fallen into the opposite class, and slavery alone began to be the sole means of advancement.' (*NH* 14.5.1).

<sup>26</sup> Tr. Hine 2010. Both Kleywegt 2005 and Zissos 2008 note this parallel.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, a final 'intertextual' interaction might confirm this suspicion. It is surely no accident that Jason unwittingly evokes the single epic precedent for the collocation *commercium mundo* here, the far-more troubling *commercium* found in Lucan's assessment of the 'world interaction' of the Nasamones. This people, Lucan tells us, lives off salvage: the wealth that comes from shipwrecks is their interaction with the whole world (*sic cum toto commercia mundo / naufragiis Nasamones habent*, *BC*.9.443-4). To cast the shadow of shipwreck over the speech with which Jason launches his voyage, and to evoke what Neil Coffee calls the 'corrupt trade' of the Nasamones in this optimistic appeal for human interaction, is to problematize any simple 'epic-imperialist' interpretation of the *Argonautica*: precisely the strategy of Tacitus' superficially straightforward encomium of *Agricola*. On this 'commerce' in Lucan see Coffee 2010: 214.

expression in the suicides of Jason's parents. Jason's decision to induce Pelias' son Acastus to join the voyage (backed by what he again, *interprets* to be an omen from Jupiter (Arg.1.156-62) has a disastrous outcome, for Pelias' *saevitia* is unleashed. Aeson too must now contemplate action, in words which closely recall Jason's earlier deliberations (Arg.1.759-61):<sup>28</sup> his final decision, however, is to display precisely the kind of futile defiance which Tacitus both provocatively deprecates in *Agricola* and repeatedly celebrates in his later historiography: the choice to commit suicide.

McGuire has already noted the close parallels in the depiction of the death of Aeson and the exemplary suicides of the *Annals*, which include standard features – the emperor's death-sentence, the decision of the wife to co-suicide, the arrival of the emperor's troops at the house of the condemned – together with the ambition to serve as heroic example for his son Promachus, in whom he wishes to embed the memory of his death together with his greatness of heart and brave action (Arg.1.771-3).<sup>29</sup> Of course, Tacitus was not the only author to memorialize the Stoic martyrs of the early empire: as Dylan Sailor points out, Tacitus' generation was immersed in the experience of heroic death, with an entire genre of laudatory biography existing to commemorate the heroic suicides of the victims of Nero and

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<sup>28</sup> ... *curae subiere ducem, ferrumne capessat /imbellē atque aevi senior gestamina primi /an patres regnique acuat mutabile vulgus* (Arg.1.759-61): 'Anxiety oppresses the leader: should he grasp an unthreatening sword and the accoutrements of a warrior in his prime, though an old man? Or should he provoke the *patres* and the kingdom's fickle mob?' One of the few 'specific' linguistic citations from Valerius may be found in Tacitus' own *vulgus mutabile*, Hist.1.69.7: Valerius himself has borrowed from historiography and Livy's *mutabiles volgi animi* (AUC.2.7.5) here, though of course this is a popular conceit: see e.g. Cicero *De Re Pub.* 2.65; Seneca, *De Ira* 2.8.1-3. For Domitian's characteristic *saevitia* (cf. Pelias' explicit association with *saevitia*, see Arg.1.700, 748, 818) see e.g. Kapust 2011: 165-6; Woodman 2014: 21-2, 75-6.

<sup>29</sup> *est etiam ante oculos aevum rudis altera proles, /ingentes animos et fortia discere facta /quem velit atque olim leti meminisse paterni*. (There is too before his eyes his other son, just a young boy, whom he wished to teach greatness of spirit and brave deeds, and who would remember his father's death). These lines form an obvious double to Jason's speech at the outset of the epic. On the framing of the suicide through heroism and *memoria* see McGuire 1997: 193-4.

Domitian.<sup>30</sup> But Tacitus' own famously complicated attitude to the Stoic martyrs in *Agricola* – his accusation that (unlike *Agricola*) these men sought fame and fate (*famam fatumque*, *Agr.*42.3) in an empty display of *libertas* – is not unique, for Aeson's own expectations of a worthy fate (*fata ... digna*) and a great death (*magnos obitus*, *Arg.*1.768-9) are themselves tragically undermined. Aeson's expectation that his death should serve as *memoria* for his son is short-lived: his last sight is of the king's soldiers bursting in and ripping his son's body to shreds, and it is the horrified spirit-Aeson who is left to bear away the memory of Promachus' death (*Arg.*1.823-6). Valerius sets Aeson's own glorious translation to the skies alongside the petty and pointless of death of the boy whose only action in the whole *Argonautica* is to die.<sup>31</sup>

It is not new to claim Valerius as a 'Tacitean' author, or at least as one whose *Argonautica* evokes a Tacitean pessimism, with its complex internal politics, dissimulating tyrants and political suicide. But by pressing the interaction of Tacitus' *Agricola* with Valerius' poem – a 'reverse reception' which highlights both texts' dynamic depiction of the role of a heroic protagonist trapped within a claustrophobically tyrannical regime – we can see that Valerius' epic is not incoherent or fundamentally fractured, but rather a negotiation of the new complex negotiations that must take place whenever an imperial ideology has to start over. While *Agricola* deals with a 'real-world' problem – constructing a quietist heroism that is not subjugation – Valerius has already translated the issue into the world of epic. In framing Jason's heroism by tyranny, and in complicating his optimism in Jovian benevolence

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<sup>30</sup> Sailor 2008: 10-35 sets Tacitus' approach to the Stoic martyrs against the broader tradition, arguing that Tacitus' 'de-sanctifying' approach both speaks to the prevalence of a more uncritical tradition of appreciation and is part of the author's own ambition to provide alternative models of heroism.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. McGuire 1997: 185-97, 228-9 who (again perhaps influenced by Tacitus' singular approach) reads suicide throughout Flavian epic as problematically un-Stoic. Zissos 2009: 362-5 offers a more positive reading of Valerius' suicide-episode, reading the Elysium scene following Aeson's death as a reconstructed ideal Republican society.

and the rewards of *labor* with a murkier vision of the costs of *commercia*, Valerius creates a new epic of empire which may be ambivalent but is hardly incoherent. Valerius instead exploits the gap between Jason's, to say nothing of the audience's, desire for a simple, teleological and optimistic epic for the new Flavian age – to *represent* and *interpret* Argo's quest in these terms – while simultaneously acknowledging the reality behind this new, post-Neronian, Flavian beginning. To this reader, the Tacitean, or more broadly 'Trajanic' ideological perspective – that is to say a perspective interested in the complexity of compromise and the difficulties of representation in negotiating past and present – makes more sense of the Flavian *Argonautica* than the mutually exclusive choices to read Valerius' epic as 'optimistic' poem for Vespasian or 'subversive' Domitianic text.

## 2. Anticipating Tacitus: *Argonautica*, *Agricola*, *Histories*

This awareness might encourage us in turn to look again at the sharp distinctions Tacitus himself attempts to forge between Flavian past and Nerva present in *Agricola*. For while Tacitus sets a tyrannical past against an idealised present, it has long been recognised that Tacitus also allows interpretative potential for the elision of that boundary-line, above all in the ambiguity of chronological reference in preface to the work.<sup>32</sup> The opening to *Agricola*, which both stresses a break with the past through a rhetoric of newness and acknowledges that this new beginning is a reiteration (*Nunc demum redit animus*, 3.1), is once again also repetition of the strategy of Valerius' own 'first' epic for the Flavian age, one that has

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<sup>32</sup> On the 'deceptively simple' then-now structure of *Agricola*'s preface and its susceptibility to deconstruction see esp. Sailor 2004: 153-8, Sailor 2008: 53-72. Lavan 2015: xlv-v, responding to the efforts of Woodman 2014: 65-7 (and esp. his notes at 1.4, 2.1, 2.3) to close these chronological loopholes, reiterates the importance of the author's decision to make the reader arbiter of interpretation, and notes that the potential to see the present time as still one hostile to virtue (*Agr.*1.4) need not be criticism of the new imperial regime.

employed the same tactics to stress the break with the Julio-Claudian past.<sup>33</sup> While the textual strategies of Valerius' epic and Tacitus' biography are clearly very different, they interact in their shared destabilization of periodisation itself: both offer the promise of a new beginning, only to elide those boundaries, underscoring how tendentious and rhetorically framed any Roman imperial regime change will be.<sup>34</sup>

If readers of Valerius' *Argonautica* have tended to stress the voyage as a retreat into myth, it has also been long recognized that when his Argonauts arrive in Colchis and embark on war (in a sustained battle-narrative across books 5-7, another innovation on the Apollonian source), they have sailed into territory that is at the forefront of contemporary Roman foreign policy. Nero's main military success had been in Armenia, but after Plautius Silvanus' expedition into the south-western Crimea, the eastern Black Sea coast had also come more directly under Roman control. Indeed, before he lost power, Nero was preparing an expedition to the Caspian Gates, creating a new legion for the task that would make for the Darial Pass to secure the region from the Sarmatians and in particular combat the new threat from east Sarmatia, the marauding Alani. This area continued to be of great concern to the Flavians: Vespasian, whose bid for imperial power was secured by shifting legions from the east, made various deals with Armenia and Parthia, the Iazyges and Suebi (cf. Tac. *Hist.*3.5),

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<sup>33</sup> Whitmarsh 2006: 310-3 well explores this 'reiterative' rhetoric of newness and *Agricola's* mimicry of 'Trajanic propagandistic idiom'. Cf. esp. the pleonastic *primo statim...ortu* of to stress a new Trajanic *beatissimum saeculum* (*Agr.*3.1). Valerius' *Argonautica* also obviously starts anew with a propagandist rhetoric of primacy that reiterates the strategies of previous imperial encomium: *Prima deum magnis canimus freta pervia natis / fatidicamque ratem* ... Seas first crossed by the mighty sons of gods I sing, and the fate-speaking ship... (*Arg.*1.1-2). *Arg.*1.7-21, foregrounding Vespasian's role in the conquest of Britain, Titus' victorious generalship and Domitian's eminence in the arts, echoes closely the propagation of imperial image engineered at the outset of Vespasian's reign. On the proem see Lefèvre 1971; Zissos 2008: 71-95; Stover 2012: 14-25, 62-70; on Flavian ideology more generally, Boyle & Dominik 2003; Kramer & Reitz 2010.

<sup>34</sup> For other examples of uncomfortable rejection of and interaction with the Flavian past in this volume see König and Rimell in this volume, Saller 2002: for Martial, Rimell (2008); Marchesi (2013); König (2013); for Pliny, Hoffer 1999, esp. 141-59; for Pliny and Tacitus, Whitton 2012; for Tacitus and Juvenal, Keane 2012; for Tacitus, Suetonius, Juvenal, Wilson 2003.



while the Dacians, Sarmatians and Rhoxolani all made attacks on the empire, aiming to capitalize on the civil war of AD 69.<sup>35</sup>

All these foreign enemies of Rome and more are then to be found not just in the pages of Tacitus' *Histories* but also in the profoundly alien tribes Valerius' Argonauts encounter in Colchis, in a consciously pre-Iliadic battle-narrative that both paints the conflict as a traditional Homeric-Virgilian war and at the same time revels in the barbarism and alien-ness of its inhabitants.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Valerius even offers some fresh ethnographical detail about these new eastern foes that anticipates the later historiographers of the Flavian period. He gives the first accurate description of arms and tactics of the Sarmatians (*Arg.*6.160-2): their distinctive weapon, the heavy lance (*contus*), their aversion to the bow, their distinctive yell: *fremitus*, not *ululatus*.<sup>37</sup> His inclusion of the Parthian ambassador Myraces, at court to make a treaty with Aetes (*Arg.*6.190-2), is also topical, given the concerted diplomacy of both Nero and Vespasian in this region: the depiction of the Argonauts springing forth to fight those 'whom the Armenians, Iberians and Parthians cannot resist' may even recall the proposal of Vologases I of Parthia in AD 75 to launch a joint Roman-Parthian expedition against the Alani.<sup>38</sup> But right from the start, any 'clean' imperialist perspective of the war is undercut

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<sup>35</sup> See Wilkes 1983; Braund 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Valerius' up-to-date geopolitics includes a range of reference extending far beyond Scythia, to Egypt, Persia, India and Germany, and incorporating many places still outside Roman control: see Shreeves 1978; Baier 2001.

<sup>37</sup> See Syme 1929.

<sup>38</sup> (*prosiliunt quos nec Rhipaea iuventus /quos nec Hiber aut tota suis Aurora pharetris /sustineat*, *Arg.*5.558-60): see Hollis 1994: 211. See too *Arg.*5.554-6, in which Castor identifies Aetes as requesting help (*bello interea sed pressus iniquo /auxilium petit: armatos dux protinus omnes /accelerare iubet*: 'Under pressure of iniquitous war Aetes seeks help: our general orders all men to hurry in arms at once'): while *auxilium petere* is a common phrase for military operations (e.g. Livy *AUC.* 8.1.10; 31.11.10 32.39.11), the unusual sense of *accelerare*, of soldiers and with *iubeo*, is much rarer and may have inspired Tac. *Hist.*2.100 (see Wijsman 1996: 254). Toohey 1993 argues for further 'Romanisation' of the Argonauts at *Arg.*3.365 and 7.573. Statius' *Thebaid* also shows interest in this issue: the comparison of Thiodamas to a young Parthian succeeding to the throne (*Theb.*8.286-93) also includes mention of the *Caspia limina* – a possible allusion to Pacorus II, who succeeded to the throne in AD 78: see Hollis 1994.

when Jason enters the tyrant Aeetes' court (itself again, recognizably 'Roman'), reminds him of their kinship, and declares himself ready to intervene in Aeetes' civil war with his brother Perses.<sup>39</sup>

Allusively too this is a civil war, for the battle-narrative of *Argonautica* consistently recalls Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. Valerius' exotic collection of tribes and peoples draws from Lucan's own all-embracing vision of a Roman civil war played out on the world stage: responding to Lucan's own excursus on *Argo*, which makes this voyage the cause of eventual world-war (BC.3.190-7) within the globe-spanning catalogue of Pompey's forces, Valerius embeds the Lucanian co-opting of the *orbis* into Rome's war in his own epic via a seam of imagery which consistently depicts the slaughter in Colchis – the Homeric-Virgilian duels, routs and massed clashes – in the words of *Bellum Civile*.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the Colchian impulse for death recalls closely Lucan's line that civil war is the slaughter of the world (*concurrunt ultroque ruunt in funera Colchi*, *Arg.*6.242; *in funere mundi / mortibus innumeris*, BC.7.617-8).

There is a significant difference in Valerius' approach to writing 'Lucanian' civil war, though. When Valerius writes originary war as a confusing clash of *bellum externum* and *bellum internum*, he does not – as Lucan does – elide the kinds of distinctions between foreign and civil war the *Bellum Civile* conspicuously tries to elide. Though Lucan's epic begins with the common lament that Romans have turned on themselves when so many foreign foes are left to fight, the typical strategy of the Neronian text is to confuse the boundaries of identity and ethnicity in the creation of a *bellum civile* on the world-scale.<sup>41</sup> *Bellum Civile*, then, revels in the presentation of civil war as world war, the elision of *orbis*

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<sup>39</sup> Note too that Colchis appoints senators (cf. *Arg.*5.464, *legit ... patres*, with Wijsman 1996: 222).

<sup>40</sup> On Lucan's catalogue see Radicke 2004: 244-5; for more on Lucan and Valerius Flaccus see Buckley 2010, Stover 2013 and below.

<sup>41</sup> This ambivalence is developed by post-Lucanian writers: cf. e.g. O'Gorman 1993 on Tacitus' *Germania*.

and *Urbs*.<sup>42</sup> Valerius' war in Colchis, on the other hand, is presented as both *bellum internum* and *bellum externum*, fusing expansionist narrative of exploration, the kind of 'clean' war stressed in the self-legitimising presentations of the Flavian regime at its outset, with a much murkier kind of war: the kind of war, in fact, that really put the dynasty in place and continued to rear its head into the 80s and 90s under Domitian.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that when Jason finally escapes the claustrophobic court at Thessaly and finds himself in what should be an uncomplicated foreign war, Valerius continues to exert destabilizing pressure on his imperializing mission. Just as *Agricola*'s antagonist Calgacus encodes defiance against Rome repeatedly as a defence of *libertas* (*Agr.*30-32) in ways that reflect uncomfortably on Rome's own identity under the principate, Valerius creates in Gesander, the chief of the Iazyges, both an archetype of barbarism and a figure who is conspicuously, if problematically, proto-Roman. In a vaunting speech before he kills the Argonaut Canthus, Gesander boasts of a way of life that clearly fulfils standard ethnographic stereotypes (a nomadic lifestyle based on warfare and plunder, a toughness inculcated by life in the frozen north, *Arg.*6.323-9). But his barbarism goes one step further: we have already learned, in a stirring speech to incite his men to battle, that the custom of the Iazyges is to euthanize their fathers before old age can make them weak (*Arg.*6.278-91). Yet this shocking barbarism is framed in a way that consistently makes Gesander sound rather Roman himself. As he calls upon the spirit of his father Voraptus to help him, he makes his father an example for the *parvi nepotes* that will follow (*Arg.*6.291), before chiding an elderly opponent in battle for the lack of *pietas* demonstrated by a son who had let him live (*Arg.*6.311). And indeed, when Gesander boasts of his tribe's hardness, he

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<sup>42</sup> See e.g. Masters 1992; on Egypt, Reed 2010.

<sup>43</sup> See esp. the presentation of victory in Judaea as 'foreign' conquest: on the importance of Judaea in establishing Flavian *bona fides* and redirecting attention from their involvement in civil conflict see esp. Mason 2016: 3-59.

does not just evoke the proto-Roman Italian identity of the *Aeneid*'s Numanus Remulus in his words – he also ties that identity to the explicit notion of both *patria* and freedom:

feror Arctois nunc liber in arvis  
cuncta tenens; ...  
numquam has hiemes, haec saxa relinquam,  
Martis agros, ubi tam saevo duravimus amne  
progeniem natosque rudes, ubi copia leti  
tanta viris. sic in patriis bellare pruinis  
praedarique iuvat talemque hanc accipe dextram!' *Arg.*6.330-1, 335-9  
Now I am free as I roam the lands of the north with all my possessions... never will I leave  
these wintry climes, these rocks – Mars' land – where we have hardened our babies, our  
young sons, in such savage water, where there is such an abundance of death for men. So it  
pleases us to make war and plunder in our icy fatherland: receive such a right hand as this!

Within the frame of reference provided by Tacitus' own complex civilisation-narrative in *Agricola*, then, we might see Gesander as more than simple blunt stereotype of the 'non-Roman'. Instead, this barbarian at the furthest ends of the earth will serve as a conductor for Roman anxieties about the costs of empire. Indeed, Gesander is not simply a 'primitive' in the mould of Tacitus' Calgacus, a foil to Rome's own submission: his status as father-killer makes him both the antithesis of what it should be to be Roman, but also only too fit for membership of a race ultimately headed for *bellum civile*.<sup>44</sup>

There is no novelty in using a primitive to reflect on Roman identity within a mythological epic, but Valerius takes a far more transgressive step when he anachronistically and jarringly compares these 'foreign' barbarians to the contemporary Roman soldier. Take Colaxes, a Scythian destined to die in Jason's *aristeia*. This figure, introduced in a catalogue of 'enemy' forces, clearly has a home in epic tradition – his mother is a nymph – but even this ancestry has precedent in historiography (Coloxais, forefather of the Scythians: cf. Herod. *Hist.*4.5) and he is the commander of a Thracian legion, which wears an emblem that, Valerius interjects, can be seen on the shield of any Roman *miles* today:

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Buckley 2010: 16-21. For Tacitus' reflections on a more 'pure' primitive identity in the *Germania* see O'Gorman 1993.

proxima Bisaltæ legio ductorque Colaxes,  
 sanguis et ipse deum, Scythicis quem Iuppiter oris  
 progenuit viridem Myracen Tibisenaque iuxta  
 ostia, semifero--dignum si credere--captus  
 corpore, nec nymphae geminos exhorruit angues.  
 cuncta phalanx insigne Iovis caelataque gestat  
 tegmina dispersos trifidis ardoribus ignes;  
 nec primus radios, miles Romane, corusci  
 fulminis et rutilas scutis diffuderis alas.

Arg.6.48-56

Next comes Bisalta's legion, and its commander Colaxes, himself of divine bloodline. Jupiter fathered him on Scythian shores, next to green Myrace and the mouth of the river Tibisis: bewitched, if we can believe it, by the nymph's half-bestial body, he did not shudder at her twin snakes. The whole phalanx bears the badge of Jupiter, shields engraved with the scattered fires of the triple lightning-bolt: Roman soldier, you were not the first to spread the rays of the gleaming lightning, with its red-golden wings, on your shield.

This barbarian Colaxes is nothing less than a proto-Roman soldier, then, regardless of whether (as some commentators suggest) his troops prefigure in particular the Roman soldiers of the Twelfth Legion (Fulminata), or offer a more generic Roman military identity.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the very context of the catalogue – drawing upon the aetiological framing of Virgil's Italian forces in the *Aeneid*, who serve to link primitive past with contemporary Roman present – forces us to consider not just whether the Roman soldier 'looks like' an eastern barbarian, but also indeed whether that the Roman soldier in any sense 'comes from' this eastern barbarian.

Thomas Baier paints Valerius' aetiological approach as artificial and mannered, a barren 'decryption' (*Entschlüsselung*) and grotesque burlesque of the *Aeneid*'s attempt to provide an aetiology for Roman character in the age of Augustus.<sup>46</sup> But if we take seriously

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Wijsman 2000: 38; Liberman 2002: 202. The Twelfth fought with Titus at the Fall of Jerusalem (cf. Tac. *Hist.* 5.1: Schenk 1999: 184 n.226), and may have been a particularly suitable comparison, given that they were posted by Domitian to the Caspian Sea (as an inscription dated between AD 83 and 93 referring to a detachment of the legion – evidence of the most eastern base of any Roman legion – shows: see *Année Epigraphique* (Paris 1951) 75, no.262, and Grosso 1954: 117-8. However, other legions also carried the lightning flash emblem (including the 11<sup>th</sup> Claudian and the 14<sup>th</sup> Gemina Martia Victrix, both part of the force Petillius Cerialis used to quell the Batavian revolt of AD 69).

<sup>46</sup> Baier 2001: 51-2.

this jarring combination of ‘Roman’ and ‘other’, centred via the figure of the Roman *miles*, then we might see this comparison as rather more appropriate in the context of Tacitus’ later exploration of Roman identity in his *Histories*, which tackle the civil wars of AD 69 as a confusing and confused series of battles and switches of allegiance between armies which are in identity both Roman and barbarian, even as the empire is tested by attacks and incursions from barbarian invaders.<sup>47</sup> Indeed Tacitus’ *Histories* famously refuse to categorise the conflicts of 69 and beyond as simply a question of civil war versus external war:

Opus adgredior opimum casibus, atrox proeliis, discors seditionibus, ipsa etiam pace saevum. quattuor principes ferro interempti: trina bella civilia, plura externa ac plerumque permixta: prosperae in Oriente, adversae in Occidente res: turbatum Illyricum, Galliae nutantes, perdomita Britannia et statim ommissa: coortae in nos Sarmatarum ac Sueborum gentes, nobilitatus cladibus mutuis Dacus, mota prope etiam Parthorum arma falsi Neronis ludibrio. *Hist.* 1.2.

I embark on a history rich in catastrophe, fierce with battles, discordant in its rebellions, savage even in peace. Four emperors died by the sword: there were three civil wars, more foreign wars, and often wars containing both elements. Things went well in the East, badly in the West. The Balkans were disturbed, the allegiance of the Gallic provinces wavered, Britain was utterly subjugated and immediately lost. The Sarmatae and Suebi rose up against us: the Dacians won fame by disasters both inflicted and suffered; a laughable false Nero even nearly prompted the Parthians to war...

Tacitus distinguishes between three civil wars (the conflict between Otho and Vitellius, Vitellius and Vespasian in AD 69; and later, the AD 89 rebellion of Saturninus against Domitian) and more external wars, the conflicts ranging from Britain to North Africa, on the Rhine and Danube and along the Parthian border.<sup>48</sup> But crucially Tacitus also includes now a third category of war, *bella permixta*, and the events he goes on to relate in the *Histories* itself – the Illyrian uprising for Vespasian, the Batavian revolt supported by some of the Gallic provinces, which is simultaneously ‘civil’ and ‘foreign’ (*interno simul externoque bello*, *Hist.* 2.69.1) and has the mixed look of civil and external war (*mixta belli civilis*

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<sup>47</sup> See esp. Ash 2001.

<sup>48</sup> See Damon 2003: 83-4.

*externique facie*, *Hist.*4.22.2) as well indeed as the rebellion of Saturninus – already re-order the paradigms of internal and external, fitting the bill as ‘mixed’ conflict.<sup>49</sup>

Valerius too is attempting to come up with a new way of addressing warfare that responds to the distinctly mixed conflict of the empire after the death of Nero.<sup>50</sup> But it is not just in the creation a new category of war – the mixed conflict – that Valerius’ own *bellum mixtum* in Colchis anticipates Tacitus. As Timothy Joseph has recently argued, Tacitus, just like Valerius, also writes the *Histories* as an ‘epic successor’, incorporating into his own historiography the same kinds of patterns of repetition that fundamentally structure the *Aeneid* and Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*.<sup>51</sup> While Tacitus writes in a spirit emulative of Virgil, as Joseph shows, his approach to conflict is Lucanian: the *Histories* work as a series of destabilising and cumulatively reinforcing civil war conflicts, as the chaos of 68-9 returns again and again.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Tacitus embeds this cycle of regression in the *Histories* at 1.50, when the *vulgus* reflect on Vitellius’ rebellion in the context of the civil wars of the Republic, contrast the survival of the empire under Caesar and Augustus with the guaranteed disaster at the success of either Vitellius or Otho, and anticipate the fresh horrors of another war to come with Vespasian:

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Joseph 2012: 34-35, who notes the contrast with Josephus’ (*BJ.*7.75-88) presentation of the Batavian uprising as *bellum externum* (and for more general reflections on the less pro-Flavian depiction of Tacitus, Keitel 1984; Ash 2001. For speculation about the Saturninus rebellion as repetition of the Batavian uprising under Vitellius, see Joseph 2012: 185-7: for the problems with the account of Timpe 2005, which seeks to separate foreign and domestic in *Histories* 4, see Whitton 2008.

<sup>50</sup> See König 2014 for an important parallel reading of similar strategies dealing with foreign, civil and mixed conflicts in Frontinus’ *Stratagemata*.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph 2012, drawing in particular on the work of Quint 1993, which argues that in Virgil the Trojan War gets played out again and again, *progressively*, until the Trojans can finally take on a role as victors and war in Italy cedes to the beginning of a new, integrated and coherent Roman personality, Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* instead writes the introduction of the principate as a *regressive* repetition of imperialist power-grabs that start with Romulus and Remus.

<sup>52</sup> On the repetitions of *Histories* see also the fundamental work of Ash 2001.

nec iam recentia saevae pacis exempla sed repetita bellorum civilium memoria captam totiens suis exercitibus urbem, vastitatem Italiae, direptiones provinciarum, Pharsaliam Philippos et Perusiam ac Mutinam, nota publicarum cladum nomina, loquebantur. [...] erant qui Vespasianum et arma Orientis augurarentur, et ut potior utroque Vespasianus, ita bellum aliud atque alias cladis horrebant. *Hist.* 1.50.2-4

Nor now did they recollect recent examples of the savage peace, but memories of the civil war: they spoke of Rome, so many times captured by its own armies; the devastation of Italy, the ransacking of the provinces; Pharsalia, Philippi, Perusia and Mutina, infamous names of public disaster... There were those who predicted Vespasian and Eastern arms, and although Vespasian was preferable to either Otho or Vitellius, still they shuddered at another war, and other disasters.

As Joseph points out, Tacitus here does not simply borrow Lucan's common conflation of Pharsalus and Philippi in the *Bellum Civile* and recycle the juxtaposition of Perugia and Mutina (something Lucan did at *BC*.1.41, *Perusina fames Mutinaeque labores*): he also repeats the narratological framing of Lucan's depiction of civil war, his *vulgus* recalling in AD 69 wars that go back to 49 BC, in the same way that the conflict of 49 BC is pitted in memory against the civil conflict of the Sullan era in *Bellum Civile*.<sup>53</sup>

Tacitus' approach to conflict, is, then, both Lucanian in its verbal texture and its construction of a narrative of regression, but in some ways distinctly non-Lucanian too. He is not interested in collapsing distinctions between centre and periphery entirely, instead shifting the focus of analysis to a different flashpoint for Roman identity, the categorisation of the rebellious legions, whose revolts against authority are both 'civil' and 'foreign' war. And once again, this approach has already been anticipated within the epic typology of Valerius' *Argonautica*, which positively demands that we read myth as history when the Scythian Ariasmenus, a warrior who has been achieving great destruction on the battlefield with his scythed chariots, is driven to self-destruction by the appearance of Pallas' aegis in a way that synthesizes Lucanian aesthetic, barbarian identity, and Roman civil war:<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> On Pharsalia as Philippi in Lucan see *BC*.1.680, 6.582, 7.872, 9.271; Lucan's 'recollection' comes via an unnamed old man (*BC*.2.67). For other negotiations of Lucan in this volume see esp. Marchesi.

<sup>54</sup> Specifically, this scene draws on *Il.*18.202-31, where Achilles, adorned with the aegis of Pallas, has such a terrifying effect on the Trojans that twelve of them are killed by their own chariots. On Valerius' Ariasmenus,



quam soli vidistis, equi. pavor occupat ingens  
excussis in terga viris diramque retorquent  
in socios non sponte luem. tunc ensibus uncis  
implicat et trepidos lacerat Discordia currus.<sup>55</sup>  
Romanas veluti saevissima cum legiones  
Tisiphone regesque movet, quorum agmina pilis,  
quorum aquilis utrimque micant eademque parentes  
rura colunt, idem lectos ex omnibus agris  
miserat infelix non haec ad proelia Thybris:  
sic modo concordēs externaque fata petentes  
Palladii rapuere metus, sic in sua versi  
funera concurrunt dominis revocantibus axes.

Arg. 6.396-406

You, horses, alone saw Pallas' aegis. Great terror overwhelms them and, having thrown their drivers out onto their backs the horses unwillingly turn a dreadful carnage upon their comrades. Then Discordia entangles the chariots with their hooked blades and cuts them to bits in their panic. Just as when Tisiphone at her most savage sets in motion Roman legions and their commanders and on both sides the battle lines gleam with javelins and standards: their parents work the same fields, and the same unhappy Tiber had sent these men, picked from the countryside, not for such battles as these. So had Pallas-induced terror seized the Scythians, men just now united and seeking to kill a foreign enemy: and thus turned to their own self-destruction, the chariots clashed together as their drivers tried to hold them back.

In a passage which deconstructs that most Roman of cultural complexes, the concept of *metus hostilis*, Valerius offers a vision of warfare that colludes with the notion that *concordia* comes through *bellum externum* (cf. 404, *concordēs externaque fata petentes*), only to turn that trope literally in on itself. As has long been recognized, Valerius' bold image of carnage, figured through the clashing legions, bears heavy traces of *Bellum Civile*'s programme for civil war. And strikingly these echoes, which come from Lucan's proem (cf. esp. *BC*.1.3 with *Arg*.6.405; *BC*.1.8 with *Arg*.6.390-1), from the most 'paradigmatic' moment for civil war, the Vulteian episode (cf. *BC*.4.463 with *Arg*.6.406), and from the famous apostrophe to Thessaly at the battle of Pharsalus (*BC*.7.847; cf. *Arg*. 6.403), permeate both simile and narrative.<sup>56</sup>

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see Wright 1998: 155-6; Schenk 1999: 307-8; Baier 2001: 77. On Greek myth and Roman relevance for Statius' *Thebaid*, cf. Henderson 1991; McNelis 2007.

<sup>55</sup> *Discordia* is the reading of Fucecchi 2006: *discordia* in Ehlers 1980.

<sup>56</sup> See esp. Rio Torres-Murciano 2006 for more sustained discussion of the role of Lucan here.

Earlier critics of Valerius – sensing an unusual moment of historical specificity to cling to – have attempted to pin the simile’s conflict down to a specific date, suggesting a dating-range from the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, to the conflict of AD 69, or even the later rebellion of Antonius Saturninus in AD 89.<sup>57</sup> But when read in anticipation of Tacitus, it becomes less necessary to find a specific time-frame for the legionary warfare we see in Valerius: for Tacitus too has recognized the value of writing each civil war as any and every Roman civil war. Rather, in its complex mixture of barbarian and Roman, civil and foreign war, the *Argonautica* offers a confused and at times bewildering battle-narrative that looks forward to the complex configuration of Roman and non-Roman identity explored via the troublingly similar picture of external and internal strife which will be the central theme of Tacitus’ *Histories*.

### **Tacitus, Successor of Valerius?**

For a long time, Valerius has been nebulously characterised as a ‘Tacitean’ author, imbuing his epic with a similar *Leidenspathos* to that of the worldviews of the *Histories* and *Annals*. Such readings have been inevitably conditioned by Tacitus’ depiction of a claustrophobic and tyrannical Rome, a picture clearly read back into the tyrants who inhabit the first Flavian epic. But this chapter has tried to develop that perspective, using ‘reverse reception’ not only as a means of confirming what we already know about Valerius’ *Argonautica* – that it presents oppressive tyranny in a ‘Romanizing’, contemporary way – but also opening out in Valerius’ epic a searching, ambivalent but not incoherent attempt at framing heroic epic from a necessarily ambivalent ideological perspective, revealing in

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<sup>57</sup> Preiswerk 1934, Ussani 1955, Burck 1981 argue for AD 69; Syme 1929 for the rebellion of Antonius Saturninus; Wijsman 2000 for the Caesar-Pompey conflict. On the simile more generally see Burck 1971; Cambier 1969: 196-213; McDonald 1970: 47-50; Shreeves 1971: 118-34; Otte 1992: 132-5; McGuire 1997: 58-9.

*Argonautica*, as in *Agricola*, the complexities a world in which the conditions for traditional heroism do not exist. Tacitus might help us rehabilitate the ‘ideological incoherence’ of the *Argonautica*, then. But Valerius also provides a helpful interpretative steer for the difficult imperialism of *Histories*, providing – albeit through an epic lens – a clearly new contribution to distinctions between internal and external war which anticipates Tacitus’ shifting ‘Roman’ and ‘non-Roman’ mixed conflicts of the Flavian period, written through a Lucanian poetics of ‘repetitive regression’. Such a literary interaction is, of course, far less secure than Tacitus’ relationship with Virgil or Lucan, authors who have left distinct intertextual traces on the historian’s work. But the more indirect literary relationship I have argued for is equally important in its own way in terms of ‘periodic interaction’, highlighting as it does how tendentious the rhetoricisation of a Nerva-Trajanic ‘new beginning’ free of the Flavian past is. Tacitus, like other Trajanic authors, does all he can to compartmentalize and contain the literary production of the Flavian period. I hope to have shown that to assume – after the lead of Tacitus and Pliny – a conspicuous *absent* literary engagement with Flavian epic is to miss the shared intellectual preoccupations, ideological manoeuvring and even parallel allusive strategies shared between Valerius and Tacitus. More fundamentally, it is to fail to challenge or intervene in the story of ‘irrelevance’ created by Tacitus and others in the wake of the fall of the Flavian dynasty. ‘Literary interaction’ with Flavian epic might not be easy to find in Tacitus and other Trajanic writers: but this does not mean that Flavian epic cannot have a meaningful interactive relationship with the authors of the next age. The ‘absent presence’ of Flavian epic should perhaps be added in to the category of ‘silenced intertexts’ which struggle to find a voice in the literature of the Trajanic age.<sup>58</sup>

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## Abbreviations

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